

VZCZCXR02129
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHLA RUEHMRE RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHKB #0221 0511457
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 201457Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2428
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNOSC/OSCE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000221

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM AJ

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: OPPOSITION MUSAVAT PARTY HOLDS SECOND SANCTIONED PROTEST ON PRICE HIKES

REF: A. BAKU 67

1B. 06 BAKU 1704

Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION JASON P. HYLAND PER 1.4(B,D)

11. (SBU) On February 18, the opposition Musavat Party staged its second sanctioned protest against the Tariff Council's January decision to raise utilities prices. In spite of the 32 degrees Fahrenheit weather - which, due to snow and severe winds felt much colder - between 250 and 300 protesters participated. This was the second sanctioned protest since police violently dispersed a peaceful, sanctioned opposition rally on November 26, 2005 (see ref b). Like the first officially approved rally on January 28 (see ref a), the February 18 protest was peaceful and well-organized.

12. (SBU) Protesters gathered at a metro station on the outskirts of Baku, and marched a short distance to Ukraine Circle, chanting variations of "Musavat," "lower prices," and unlike the first protest, "resign." They carried signs with slogans such as "end poverty" and "take your hands out of our pockets." Due to the harsh weather conditions, the protest lasted 45 minutes, rather than the two hours Musavat had been allotted by the Baku Mayor's Office. Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar was the only speaker; he thanked the crowd for attending the protest in spite of the weather, and urged party members to continue holding protests. Musavat has since announced its intentions to hold another protest against the price increases on March 18.

13. (C) COMMENT: The relatively low turnout at the January 28 and February 18 protests is notable, and indicative of the relatively passive attitude of the population. From discussions with our contacts, it is evident that people are upset about the price increases, but public reaction remains muted. This could be because of fear of repercussions, hopelessness, lack of support for the opposition, or some combination of the three. While the GOAJ's decision to allow Musavat to carry out two protest rallies is a positive development, full restoration of the right to freedom of assembly is critical to Azerbaijan's democratic development. This includes allowing other parties to protest and removing the requirement to hold rallies only in "approved" locations on the outskirts of Baku. We will continue to engage with the GOAJ on this issue and report on developments.

DERSE